



01/31/03

Sen. Bob Morton

Reviving unhealthy forests a win-win for Washington

It is no secret the health of Washington's forests is deteriorating. The proof is in more frequent and greater-scale wildfires, fed by pests, disease and overgrowth of our dry forestlands. These wildfires cost millions of dollars, destroy homes and local economies, and put firefighters in mortal danger. The devastation caused by the wildfires also accounts for loss of harvestable timber on our state's trust lands (used to benefit education), wildlife, wildlife habitat and recreational opportunities in our state, putting our Northwest quality of life at stake.

Pests and diseases don't discriminate between federal, state and private land. Without a collaborative effort from the federal government, our goal of healthy forests is hopeless. Individual efforts by the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and private forestland owners are simply inadequate.

Last week I announced my efforts to turn things around in addressing the forest disease of our state. Both of my proposals on this issue had public hearings last week.

Senate Bill 5144 aims to more efficiently and effectively manage pest and disease control in Washington's forests by reorganizing responsibility and accountability between the U.S. Department of Agriculture and DNR. Currently, the two agencies are on the front line of pest and disease control. The agencies carry out similar duties in their control efforts, and, oftentimes, the line between their duties is blurred. This bill puts our state agencies on the same page by clarifying responsibilities and streamlining the pest and disease control process in our forests.

Senate Joint Memorial 8002 asks Congress for the authority to use revenue generated from harvest activities to fund ecosystem restoration and reforestation, and for adequate funding for the Forest Service's efforts to improve the health of Washington's federally owned forests.

There are approximately 700,000 acres of dense, dry forestland in the 4 million-acre Okanogan and Wenatchee national forests, and about 270,000 more acres in the

Colville National Forest. These forests have experienced numerous large fires since 1970 that have burned our dry forest landscapes.

Dry forests with a high density of small trees add fuel to the fire. Some small trees are not large enough for harvest, but trees as small as five to seven inches in diameter breast height already have market value. Getting the permit to harvest is the stumbling point. State agencies must be more aggressive in granting necessary timber harvest permits for dry forestlands when the health of Washington's forests is at stake.

The Forest Service has already implemented the "Dry Forest Strategy," which includes identification of targeted areas for timber harvest for the sake of forest health. However, with its current funding and resources, USFS can only thin about 8,000 acres per year. At this rate, the risk will never be adequately addressed. Stepping up the pace of this program in Washington must be a priority.

As many of you heard in the State of the Union speech given by President Bush, he has sent Congress a Healthy Forests Initiative to help prevent the catastrophic fires that devastate communities, kill wildlife, and burn away millions of acres of treasured forests. I am pleased to hear President Bush's commitment to this effort, and it is my hope that we can work with the federal government to improve the health of the forests in this state.

Bringing our forests back to their former glory means fewer wildfires, more plentiful timber harvests benefiting our state's education system, a place for our wildlife to live, continued recreational opportunities, and a preservation of our Northwest quality of life. Healthy forests are a win-win situation for the residents of Washington state.

Senator Morton represents the 7th Legislative District and resides in Orient. He is the chairman of the Senate Natural Resources, Energy and Water Committee.

-end-

*For more information contact Tami Davis (360) 786-7519 or davis_ta@leg.wa.gov
For the latest news and information from the Senate Republican Caucus
Visit the Senate Republican Media Center at <http://www.src.wa.gov>*